

Chamber fears Sauble parking rates are hurting businesses

Owen Sound Sun Times

March 5, 2013

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South Bruce Peninsula

The Sauble Beach Chamber of Commerce is convinced the cost to park at the beach is turning visitors away and some members want to see the rates reduced.

The chamber has sent a letter to members of council asking the town to consider reducing the rates. The cost to park along Lakeshore Blvd. is \$3 per hour to a maximum of \$15 per day - the same rate for municipal parking lots. To park on Second Ave. N. is \$2 per hour to a maximum of \$10 a day.

"It has been the last couple of years, as parking got up to \$15, that I have noticed attendance has really dropped off," said Bev Buckton, a Sauble business owner and member of the chamber's executive committee. "The last couple years we have had fantastic weather and I've noticed revenues have been dropping and I have noticed more importantly that customer counts have been going down."

Buckton said he did a survey among chamber members to see if they had been experiencing a similar drop. Some 67.5% of them believe paid parking is having a negative impact on tourism.

The chamber has also been conducting surveys on Facebook and its website and they are getting the same comments from tourists. In late November, Sauble Beach Fun World owner Fred Robertson announced the business would not be reopening in 2013. He blamed paid parking for leaving people with less money to spend at businesses and higher taxes for his decision.

"The paid parking is becoming a huge disincentive for people to visit so obviously it is a concern for us," said Buckton.

The chamber has statistics from the town on paid parking and they show the increase in rates is not increasing revenue.

Between 2009 and 2010, when the rate went from \$10 per day to \$15 per day, the amount generated through the town's ticket dispensers dropped from more than \$ 230,000 to just over \$200,000. The number of vehicles that parked daily and used a ticket dispenser dropped from just over 23,000 in 2009 to just under 13,500 in 2010. The numbers for 2011 and 2012 were slightly higher than 2010.

In its letter, the chamber suggests reducing rates to the pre2009 levels, when they were between \$5 and \$10 per day.

"We don't expect that paid parking is going away. We are not going to put that genie back in the bottle. It is here to stay," said Buckton. "But we have surpassed the level at what people are prepared to tolerate." The chamber suggests tying the reduction in with Retro Sauble Beach marketing scheme for 2013, where businesses could advertise a "Retro Rollback" on parking.

"Sauble Beach has an oldfashioned '60s, '70s feel that we are trying to recapture," said Buckton. "We think that kind of retro rollback idea would be a good way to show some good will, some

good faith with tourists that we understand their concerns. We understand the economy continues to be a challenge and high gas prices are a pain in the butt."

Buckton said chamber members understand the town's need to pay the bills. Business owners have a very good working relationship with the municipality and are hopeful everyone's concerns are addressed, he said.

"We are really just starting the dialogue with the town and look forward to really good discussion and a mutually beneficial arrangement for us all," said Buckton.

Coun. Janice Jackson said she is open to discussing the matter and understands the concerns of the businesspeople, but said it is a fine balancing act between having money to maintain the beach and not charging too much as to discourage visitors.

"If we don't make enough parking revenue to cover the cost of maintaining the beach, then the taxpayers from every corner of the municipality will have to pay for it," said Jackson. "I'm not in favour of the taxpayers in the municipality covering that charge."

While the drop in the number of vehicles parked on the streets hasn't made business owners very happy, residents on those streets are happier, Jackson said.

"I know our residential community is much happier with half the cars on the streets," she said.

Jackson said when the town charged \$5 a day they had significantly more cars parked on the streets, but they generated far less revenue. "While I am not in favour of dropping it to \$5 a day, I would be more than happy to debate the merits of reducing the fee somewhat," said Jackson.